

AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT FICTION: AN OVERVIEW

RAJEEP KUMAR TIRKEY¹ & JAP PREET KAUR BHANGU²

Department, of Management & Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering and Technology,
Longowal, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to take account of the development of African American Young Adult Fiction in English. The emergence of Young Adult Literature as a separate genre of study has been relatively a recent development. Scholars generally agree that the target age group for Young Adult Literature is from twelve to twenty years. The Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association (YALSA) defines Young Adult Literature as literature written, published for and marketed to young adults, and aimed at “promoting positive teenage development” (www.ala.org/yalsa). Young Adult literature thus refers to the materials written and published and marketed for young adults. It is aimed at indicating ways young adults may explore individuality, comprehend as well as reconstruct identity and find their place in society. Young Adult literature thus relates to the “emotional, intellectual and developmental” components of young adults in the real and literary worlds (Cart 2010: 28–31). The present paper in particular focuses on the emergence of African American Young Adult Fiction.

KEYWORDS: Young Adult Literature, African American Young Adult Fiction, Coretta Scott King Award, African American Identity, Education

INTRODUCTION

African American Young Adult Fiction as part of African American literature has been a recent phenomena. Virginia Hamilton’s *Zeely* (1967) is taken as the first work written specifically for African American young adults. Since then, a number of writers such as Virginia Hamilton, Mildred D. Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, Eloise Greenfield, etc., have been writing in this genre. It may however be noted that African American community realized quite early the need for literature focused particularly on African American children and young adults in order to teach them and guide them in the difficult years of growing up

W. E. B. DuBois, one of the most renowned African American writers, thinkers and visionaries recognized early, the need for separate literature for black children to impact shaping of their identity and to guide them towards a better future. In “The True Brownies” published in the 1919 edition of *The Crisis*, DuBois gave a call to black writers to write for young black children in order

- To make colored children realize that being “colored” is a normal, beautiful thing.
- To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race.
- To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons.
- To teach them delicately a code of honor and action in their relations with white children.

- To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their homes and companions.
- To point out the best amusements and joys and worth-while things of life.
- To inspire them to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice (Du Bois 1919: p286).

It is indeed remarkable how during those early years, DuBois could explicitly voice the vision and suggest steps black community needed to take while bringing up their children. Hence a call was given to the black community to put education of their children as top most priority. For the African American Young Adult literature to take shape however, took a lot of time, slowly, book by book as many African American writers gradually appeared on the scene.

In broader African American literature however, there have been a number of writers who while addressing community related issues gave attention to those specific to the young adults also. As African American literary writers began telling their stories, a number of works had young adults as their protagonists or important characters. These works however were not written primarily for African American Young Adults. As such even though raising issues specific to young adults' needs, these do not qualify to be known as African American Young Adult fiction. Notable among these include, Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro life* (1920), *Not without laughter* (1930) a semi autobiographical work written by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Richard Wright's *Native son* (1940), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), etc. In later years also works such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), etc., also addressed similar themes.

The introduction of Coretta Scott King Award has been responsible to a great extent for the development of African American Young Adult literature. Founded in 1969 by Mabel McKissick and Glyndon Greer at the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey in America, the Coretta Scott King Awards are given annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that express an admiration of African American culture and universal human values. The award was introduced to commemorate the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and honor his wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace and world brotherhood. The first award was given to Lillie Patterson in 1970 for her biography, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Man of Peace* (1969). Since then the award given every year has been a mechanism through which many African American artists have gained recognition as well as widespread visibility among the people. The notable winners over the years have been such as, Eloise Greenfield, Walter Dean Myers, Virginia Hamilton, Mildred D. Taylor, Angela Johnson, Sharon Draper, Jacqueline Woodson, Nikki Grimes, Kader Nelson, Rita William-Garcia etc. Jacqueline Woodson is the latest winner of the award for her work *brown girl dreaming* (2014). Historically and officially, the African American young adult writers explore black consciousness focusing on experiences of everyday life of the African American community. As such, problems related to family, relationships, racism, drugs and crime, teen pregnancy etc. have been main concerns in their works. In addition, these writers also take up gender related issues faced by young adults.

A look at the works produced during the seventies, the decade when the genre came into being, reveals the community's concern with political as well as sociological scenario in America. In *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970) Donna Brazilenarrates the biography of a black woman Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to contest presidential election in

America. The book is meant to be a lesson for young Americans witnessing the acrimonious divisiveness present in the political system. Alice Childress' *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973) is a realistic portrait of a young black boy who becomes a drug addict. The novel "mirrors urban ghetto life, depicting African Americans who seem fragmented and alienated because of race, gender and class barriers" (www.sparknotes.com). Childress creates a realistic character Benjie, a drug addict, and she also raises the issues concerning identity and the quest for wholeness that surround the black children. In *Song of the Trees* (1975), Mildred D. Taylor brings to life a rare and special family relationship which continues to be relevant at any given time. Rather, she offers her readers, as Karen Patricia Smith aptly observes, "clear and compelling vignettes of a family whose spirituality, love, unity, and vision enable them to survive successfully despite overwhelming social, political and economic obstacles" (Smith 2001: 273). Another notable work written during the seventies was Walter Dean Myers' *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (1975). Myers brings to life with warmth and good humor an unusual group of boys and girls, who learn to be themselves through their associations with one another. *Paul Robeson* (1975) written by Eloise Greenfield, is a biography of Paul Robeson, a well-known civil rights activist, accomplished soccer player who spent his entire life fighting against the established forms of prejudice and racial disparity. Written from the historical point of view for the black children, this book becomes a source of inspiration and information for black children. *Escape to Freedom* (1978) is a historical play that tells the story of slavery and racism. In this historical play, Ossie Davis gives a different interpretation to the theme when he projects that to get absolute freedom, it is necessary for both blacks and whites to join hands

The African American Young Adult writers of the 1970s thus represented the socio- economic condition of the society in a way that both educated and entertained their readers. The biographies were aimed at inspiring and boosting the self-confidence of young adults as also to uplift their spirits so that they may nurture the dream of the idea of equality in society. The realistic environment portrayed in these novels was meant to enable the young readers the practical problems that they encountered on daily basis. The historical novels taught them to learn from the community's past and at the same time these writers ensured that the communal past remained alive in the consciousness as a reminder of the struggle put up by the black community for civil rights and respect.

In the 1980s, socio-economic and political conditions of blacks were rapidly changing. The black people were gradually making their presence felt in all spheres of social and political life. The number of middle class increased, so increased the educated class. However, there was not much growth in the African American Young Adult Fiction. A number of new writers emerged but the earlier writers continued to completely dominate the literary scene. Realistic fiction flourished so did the biographies and historical fiction. Virginia Hamilton and James Haskin won greater acclaim when honored for black children and youth with the award for writing books. The themes and issues more or less continued to reflect along traditional lines.

Walter Dean Myers also continued to win laurels for his realistic approach to the social issues related to African American young adults. His works were well received and appreciated. *The Young Landlords* (1979), is about a group of Harlem boys who become landlords by chance. Paul the protagonist learns that it is easier to protest from across the street than to live with the day to day responsibility. Alice Childress' *Rainbow Jordan* (1981) is the story of a young black girl, Rainbow, who lives with her absent mother Kathie. This book focuses on the mother daughter relationship. Childress narrates the story beautifully and brings out the image of victimized black woman in this novel. James Haskin's *Lena Horne* (1983), is a biography of celebrated singer Lena Horne. It is a story of a black woman determined to succeed in life.

She overcomes the hurdles of poverty and racial discrimination to become one of the most successful black vocalists of all time. It is an inspirational story for all black children, particularly for black girls. Hamilton in her novel *Junius Over Far* (1985), reiterates the value of family relationship by weaving a beautiful story of a boy's love for his grandfather. Through their story Hamilton narrates the saga of a man's rediscovery of his roots, and an old man's dignity and belonging.

The Friendship (1987), by Mildred D. Taylor, is a story set in the 1930s of a friendship between a black and a white man which has a tragic end. The story relates the difficult times of 1930s amidst financial depression which further had the black community. The novel poignantly brings out the impossibility of white black friendship on equal terms.

The 1990s was a decade of significant change at cultural, political and social levels. As a consequence, more emphasis came to be laid on a portrayal of the contemporary African American reality. Mildred Pitts Walter's *Mississippi Challenge* (1992) is a compelling account of the struggle for voting rights of the African Americans in Mississippi. Unlike most histories of civil rights movements, this work specifically examines the importance of African Americans in leadership roles. The novel set in the turbulent 1960s, effectively portrays the electric atmosphere when young people were galvanized to stand up against centuries of social marginalization to demand their rights. Rita Williams-Garcia's *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1996) is a story about a fourteen year old mother, Gayle who is second time pregnant. Without moralizing, the writer gives readers a good, hard look at the limitations of a world view in which sex and children are casual events. The message of the book is that with love, respect and a push at the right time, any person can change for the better one's life. In *Slam!* (1996), Walter Dean Myers captures the pace and feel of inner city life as he climbs into the shoes of an angry, confused young man, Greg Slam Harris, watching his friends making right or wrong turns, and wondering about his own direction. Slam comes to realize that life goes on and not all games end at the buzzer. The book encourages young blacks to find a way to make pride work for, rather against oneself. In *Forged by Fire* (1996), Sharon M. Draper portrays an African American young boy Gerald who grows into a decent man, a loving brother and a steadfast son despite the cruelties of his childhood. In *Heaven* (1997), on the other hand Angela Johnson gives an account of a young black girl Marley who discovers her true identity through her own family's past. Johnson's message to young children is to take pride in their race and history.

The new millennium saw eventful changes taking place in the African American community. The emergence of black female writers with their award winning works almost overshadowed the male writers. Secondly, during this phase, the representational style of the writers also changed from voicing the concerns of the community to those of individuals. In other words, the objective concern of the writers became the subjective as such the feelings and sentiments of individual came to be on stage. The turn of the twentieth century marked the beginning of a new era in the history of African American Young Adult literature.

Bryan Collier's *Uptown* (2000), winner of the 2001 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, projects reality as seen through the eyes of a little boy who lives in Uptown. The writer's poetic text and beautiful, intricate illustrations evoke every aspect of Harlem, from the legendary Apollo Theatre to chocolate-colored brown stones, weekend shopping on 125th Street, and the music of Duke Ellington (www.goodreads.com). Nikki Grimes' *Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman* (2003) is an inspirational tale of a young black woman whose determination reaches new heights. Her strong faith and determination helps her overcome obstacles of poverty, racism and gender discrimination to become the first African American female pilot. Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* (2003) deals with the subject of teen pregnancy and parenting. The story is narrated by Bobby the sixteen years old father. Johnson thus focuses on an issue not dealt with

before in the African American Young Adult fiction. Floyd Cooper's *The Blacker the Berry* (2008) once again asserts the idea of 'black is beautiful'. Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun* (2009), tells a story from a woman's perspective. Draper revises, as Wanda Brooks and Jonda C. McNair succinctly remark, "historical assumptions about African culture, enslaved black women and white free and indentured women" (Brooks, 2008: 61). The story narrates a journey of self discovery by the protagonist Amari. *Ninth Ward* (2010), by Jewell Parker Rhodes, is also a story of survival and reconstruction. The story is not as much about the tyranny of racial discrimination as about the aftermath of natural catastrophe, Katrina. The writer's romanticized presentation however, threatens to undermine the collective sense of plight faced during and after Katrina by the Ninth Ward residents. In *P.S. Be Eleven* (2013), the winner of Coretta Scott King Award 2014, Rita Williams-Garcia presents the American society from the point of view of Gaither sisters who are caught up in the problems of adults. She also talks about the important issues such as race, gender and identity in this historical novel. The development of African American Young Adult fiction thus also reflects a development of themes and issues that writers deal with in their works. More and more writers have begun to pick up issues other than those explored traditionally in African American literature.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, African American Young Adult literature is an expression of the concern of the African American community regarding the kind of individuals they wish their young to become in life. These writers have changed the perspective of African American Young Adult fiction through their bold and defining themes. The writers are not afraid to deal with the controversial themes such as sex, pregnancy, color prejudice within black community etc., in their works. Thus they project a progressive outlook in tune with the contemporary times. At the same time African American young adult writers also attempt to reach out to multicultural audience by adopting a multidimensional approach. The overall perspective however continues to be African American.

African American young adult literature thus continues to be, as Rudine Sims Bishop so rightly points out, a literature of purpose, seldom art for art's sake (Bishop 2012: 10). This literature focuses on the struggles of young African Americans while also attempting to foster insight into some critically important social issues pertaining to race, gender, misrepresentation, segregation and discrimination etc. The overall purpose is to invite young readers to discover and utilize their potential in the positive direction. African American Young Adult Fiction thus reiterates the connection between literature and life. These books are written for education, instruction, entertainment as also to indicate ways by which historical inequities connected to racism, socio-economic factors and ethnic prejudice may be eliminated. African American Young Adult fiction thus is a dynamic genre. Still in the making, it claims to be not merely a literature but the voice of the African American community. These books aim at teaching history, values, self-worth, confidence, etc., in order to counter and nullify the negative effects of racism, exploitation and persecution.

The prevalent multicultural literary practice lends space to African American writers to examine cultural, political and sociological dilemmas and changing dynamics in the societal paraphernalia. To what extent it is possible to continue with writing race-based literature, however, is a question without any easy or final answers. The African American literary community however does not consider it to be a valid objection. The realization that mainstream literature written for young adults does not address the racial concerns, leads the African American writers to consciously incorporate in their works, themes and issues particularly aimed at those faced by young blacks in America. The writers are not ready to give in to the demand to write 'colour-blind' literature. African American Young Adult fiction thus continues to address community issues.

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